



Katrina's Jewish Voices

Oral History

of

Susan Hess

Rosalind Hinton, Oral Historian

November 16, 2006

New Orleans, LA

PREFACE

Katrina's Jewish Voices is a project of the Jewish Women's Archive in collaboration with the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Launched in August 2006, almost a year after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the project collected oral histories and digital artifacts to create the most comprehensive record of the Jewish community's experiences of Katrina in existence.

The 85 oral history interviews draw on the personal experiences of American Jews whose lives were touched by one of the most devastating humanitarian and natural disasters in American history. Collectively, the interviews reveal the values underlying American Jewish life at the turn of the 21st century, the fragility of our sense of security and well-being, and the connectedness of our lives – across boundaries of race, religion, and culture, as well as geographic distance and generational divides. From the struggles of individuals in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast Jewish communities to rebuild their lives and the efforts of people across the country to provide support and relief, *Katrina's Jewish Voices* provides eloquent and intimate testimony to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of community in the face of daunting challenges.

Access: *Katrina's Jewish Voices* interviews were recorded on digital video. The recordings and transcripts are available at the Jewish Women's Archive in Brookline, Massachusetts and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life in Jackson, Mississippi.

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The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) is a private, not-for-profit corporation dedicated to providing educational and rabbinic services to isolated Jewish communities, documenting and preserving the rich history of the Southern Jewish experience, and promoting a Jewish cultural presence throughout a 13-state region. For further information about ISJL, visit isjl.org or send an e mail to information@isjl.org.



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Susan Hess

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Susan Hess at her home at 8 Garden Lane in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Thursday, November 16, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Susan, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Susan Hess: Yes, I do.

RH: So why don't we begin a little about when and where you were born, and your general and Jewish education.

SH: I was born in New York, please excuse my voice. I was born in New York, actually in Brooklyn. I grew up on Long Island. My parents then moved to Manhattan after I graduated from high school. I went to college in Upstate New York at Cornell University. I stayed at Cornell until the end of my sophomore year, when I then moved to New Orleans. As far as my Jewish education, I went to Sunday School. I was confirmed. That was it. And I was a member of a Reform congregation on Long Island called Central Synagogue.

RH: Did you attend High Holidays and that kind of --

SH: Oh yes. We did. We were Reform but we did go to synagogue on High Holidays. When I was being confirmed, I even went to synagogue

every week because we had to do that. We had never celebrated Shabbat at home, although we used to go to my grandparents' house for dinner every week. It was really not a Shabbat dinner. My grandmother was a cook of lots of traditional Jewish dishes, so ethnically, we always had matzo ball soup and chopped liver and tzimmes and whatever, you know. And we always had Passover. That's the one thing that people say is the most popular holiday among Jewish people. They are more likely to celebrate Passover than any other holiday. That was true for us as well.

RH: That's great. So, you came to New Orleans. I think you said at 19?

SH: Yes, correct. I came as a new bride at the age of 19. I guess they don't do that too much anymore. But, I moved here three days before Hurricane Betsy, which was the other devastating storm that happened in the city of New Orleans. That was 40 years ago in 1965.

RH: Do you remember --

SH: Oh yes.

RH: -- what that was like?

SH: I do.

RH: Where did you think you'd come to?

SH: I remember, it was a violent storm. I was not afraid. I, in fact, slept through a lot of it, believe it or not. But I do remember very vividly listening to the radio, and there was somebody down at Grand Isle. He was on the radio. He was saying, the house is shaking. I don't know

how long I'm going to be able to stay here. It's very scary. There's no electricity. He went off the air. I never knew what happened to that man. He might have been just swept away. Who knows. It was a very vivid memory. From 40 years, I still think about it. After the storm, my first husband and I, whose name was Eric Aschaffenburg, we went and did volunteer work. We had no electricity. There was no telephone. There was no way for me to tell my parents that I was OK. For two weeks, there was no way for me to tell my parents that I was OK. They were completely, completely freaked out, as you can imagine. But we didn't have any telephone or any electricity for two weeks. But, my husband and I went and volunteered. We made sandwiches. We helped the people in the area of the city, which was more to the -- slightly to the east of us, that had flooding. In Carrolton Park, it was called. And they had a lot of very deep flooding. We went there. We made sandwiches. We cooked meals. We helped them with their houses. We did a lot of -- we did what we could to help those people. And we only thanked God, all of the time as we were doing it, that we were not more damaged. In truth, we were very damaged. Everything I owned was ruined. I just didn't own anything in those days. The roof was ripped off of the apartment. I hadn't even unpacked my boxes. We truly had only been there three days. And we had -- I remember very well, we were at the grocery store buying brooms and mops and getting ready to settle into our apartment when my husband's mother

called and said, do you know there's a hurricane? Well, we didn't even know there was a hurricane so we went dashing home and did what we could, which was very little. And then we went to stay with his parents. And I always said that I was always glad to have been there for the storm, even though it was very devastating because everything in New Orleans was dated pre-Betsy and post-Betsy from then and for years and years after that. And I was very grateful for the fact that I had experienced it so that I could become immediately a part of the community. Whereas, if I had not experienced it, I would have been an outsider for years.

RH: That's an interesting observation. You kind of bonded through this --

SH: Yeah, that's true.

RH: -- hurricane.

SH: It's true. And we went and just moved from person's house to person's house, eating everything that was in their freezer because people were losing everything that was in their freezer.

RH: So, that two weeks after, when there was no power, people were emptying their freezers and cooking a lot?

SH: Right. We feasted.

RH: So tell me a little about your perspective on the Jewish community? What's it like to be Jewish in New Orleans?

SH: Well, this Jewish community is very close. You know, it's very easy to know almost every single person because there are just not that many

of us. Before the storm, there were about 10,000 Jews, at least that's the number that I had always heard. That included men, women, and children. Maybe I didn't know all of the children, but generally speaking, I certainly knew all of the women from Hadassah or National Council of Jewish Women. I was a member of both. I still am. And almost every single woman in the community is a member of one or the other. Plus, my husband is very active Jewishly, and he was always interested in other, you know, streams of Judaism, I guess you would say. So we go to synagogues and do participate in events at the Conservative congregation, at the Orthodox congregation. So, in other words, we might know other people that other people in the Reform community might not know because we participate in all of those different activities.

RH: So, when you say streams of Judaism?

SH: Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative.

RH: OK.

SH: We don't have any Reconstructionist here.

RH: OK. OK. So, you feel that you're a little different than a lot because you kind of crossover into some of the other communities a lot more?

SH: Yeah. Not only us, but we are among those who do.

RH: OK. I got you. Is there any place that served as the central gathering place for you and your family in these years in New Orleans?

SH: I'm not quite sure I understand what you mean. Like a temple, for example?

RH: Well, a temple or a social gathering spot or a place for you and your family?

SH: Well, we've always been members of Temple Sinai, and we do do as a family things associated with Temple Sinai. All of our children had bar and bat mitzvahs there. Home. Home is the place where we gather. We have Shabbat dinner every Friday night, and any children who are around come. They bring their friends.

RH: So, when did you decide to kind of do it a little differently than when you grew up?

SH: It was my husband who decided. It was my second husband. His name is Bill Hess, and we've been married for 33 years. He was -- he had never been inside of a synagogue when we got married. His parents were Jewish but he knew nothing. Absolutely nothing. And he wanted to have a judge marry us, but his grandmother said, I'm sorry, I'm not coming to your wedding if you don't have a rabbi. And she said that, not because she thought he needed a rabbi, but because she thought my family would like a rabbi, which they would, of course. But they wouldn't have forced me to. But we did have a rabbi. And of course, the rabbi wanted to meet Bill and talk to him. It was the first time he had ever spoken to a rabbi in his life, and I guess the conversation intrigued him because gradually, over time, he began to

investigate what it meant to be Jewish. He became very enamored. He studies a great deal now and he knows a lot. He taught himself Hebrew. He -- he's well informed Jewishly at this point. And he loves it. It informs his life I would say. So, I guess when our daughter was four, he said to me, we're not going to celebrate Christmas anymore. We're going to -- we're going to change things around here. And that's when we began to do things a little more Jewishly and we began to do Shabbat dinners.

RH: It's not uncommon for Jews in New Orleans to celebrate --

SH: No. We didn't.

RH: -- Christmas.

SH: We didn't really celebrate Christmas. What I meant is that we had gift giving at Christmas time, but we didn't do anything else.

RH: Right. Right.

SH: But he didn't want to do that much any more.

RH: OK.

SH: So, gradually we got away from it. I remember very distinctly after we got married, I had a son from my first marriage and it became time for him to start at Sunday School, and we were not members of any congregation, so I said to Bill, we have to join a synagogue. It's time for our son to go to Sunday School. So we joined Temple Sinai. He has a long history at Temple Sinai. His [great uncle] was president of Temple Sinai.

RH: His [great uncle] was?

SH: [Walter Stern, Sr.]

RH: [Walter Stern, Sr.]

SH: Right. And he had others, Maurice Stern, and there were several others from the family who were very prominent at Temple Sinai. So, we joined there and our son started. This was my son, actually, from my first marriage, but he was raised by Bill. So, he started at Sunday School and it came to December-time for the Hanukkah dinner, and I said, we're going to the Hanukkah dinner, and he said, I'm not going to the Hanukkah dinner, and I said, yes, you're going. And so, once he got over that little hurdle, you know, things sort of opened up for him.

RH: It's a kind of interesting tag-team you made --

SH: Right. Right.

RH: -- moving into Temple Sinai.

SH: That's true. He's left me in the dust, let me say. He's very much more observant and interested. I mean, not that I'm not interested but he is very observant. He goes to services every Saturday morning.

RH: Well, why don't we talk a little now about Katrina? And tell me when Katrina just came into your consciousness and what you and your husband decided to do.

SH: Well, we were watching the storm very closely. I don't see how anybody couldn't have been watching the storm very closely. I guess there were some people who were oblivious. They might have been

out of town or -- I don't know. But anyway, for us, it was very much on the horizon. And we talked about it, should we leave. And we've never -- I've never, in my life, evacuated for a hurricane, and I didn't really feel any differently about this one. We're on high ground here. We have a generator. We thought we'd be OK. In truth, we were OK. You know, the storm came. It was a vicious storm. But, when it was over, we were OK. And the whole city was OK. You know, a few trees down, no electricity, but the devastation came from the flooding. We didn't know about it. We had no electricity. We had no way of knowing what was happening at that point. And we went to bed that Monday night of the storm thinking everything was OK and it was going to be better the next day. And when we woke up on Tuesday morning, of course it was anything but better. There was water all around us. And it was still rising. We could see it rolling in. We [had] four dogs, four big dogs, at the time. We actually have five, now, but nevertheless, at that time we had four big dogs, and it would have been very difficult for us to evacuate with four big dogs. We didn't have a vehicle large enough for all of us to fit in. We would have had to go in two separate vehicles. And it was very complicated. We just decided to stay. Well, a friend of mine, whose daughter is a student -- was a student -- at Tulane at the time, called on Sunday afternoon. This was the Sunday -- the storm was approaching. It was pretty close at that point, but it hadn't gotten here yet. He said his daughter had missed her plane to get out on

Saturday and she was freaking out and could I go and get her and do with her whatever it is we've decided to do. So I drove Uptown to Tulane University and it was a ghost town. There was nobody around. It freaked me out, really, when I drove up there. You know, you would hear -- it was like after a nuclear war or something. There was no -- nobody was around. The shutters were banging. And you know, it was like you were the only person in the world. So, I got to her house where she was supposed to be and I knocked on the door. No answer. I went around the side. I knocked on the door. No answer. So I didn't know what to think, you know. I called on the cell phone. Thank God I brought my cell phone with me. I called her on her cell phone, and she was indeed in there. She was huddled on the floor. She was catatonic. That's all I can say. She could not move. So I had to go in there and get her and bring her out, put her in the car, with her knapsack that she had ready, and bring her to the house. So, either she was going to go with us, if we decided to go, or she was going to stick it out with us. We ultimately decided to stay. And she stayed with us. She -- I'm glad she did stay with us, because she had a cell phone with her that was not dependent on a 504 telephone number, and although it didn't work at first, by Tuesday night, she began to be able to use her cell phone, and we were able to call around and find where our children were because none of our children -- we didn't know where our children were. We didn't know if they had stayed or gone.

RH: So, how many children do you have and --

SH: I have three children. Two of them are here and one lives in New York.

Or did live in New York at the time. So, ultimately we found out that our oldest son, whose name is Darren, he and his fiancée, now wife, evacuated in a very harrowing means to -- they drove to Appaloosa, Louisiana. They wound up staying there with a family that they had never met before for seven weeks with their dog and their three cats.

RH: So, did they evacuate -- they didn't evacuate before the storm?

SH: No. No. I'll tell you that story if you want to hear it.

RH: Sure.

SH: The other -- our other son who was here, he went to Atlanta, and we didn't know where he had gone. We didn't know where either one of them were to be honest with you.

RH: So, before you knew they were going to stay? Did you know that?

SH: Yeah. We knew they were going to stay. But we didn't know, once they decided to leave, where they would end up.

RH: Wow.

SH: Actually, our younger son decided to leave before the storm at the last minute, but by then, the electricity was out and he couldn't tell us. He drove to Atlanta and stayed with a friend of his. He went there because his business, his job, had another part of the company was located in Atlanta. So he went there, figuring he could work out of that office since the office here probably would be closed. He had no idea how

closed. It's still closed. Over a year later, it's still closed. Anyway, and our daughter, who was in New York, kind of became our clearinghouse for trying to get messages back and forth. But we couldn't do that until Tuesday night because we didn't have any means of communication. There was no cell phone or anything. Now, our older son has an interesting story of his own. He and his fiancée were living in an apartment building in the Warehouse District, and they thought they would be fine, they're on the fifth floor. They had put their cars in a parking garage up on high ground, and they really thought that they would be OK. Well, they were OK for the storm. They did lose their electricity, but it wasn't a big deal. They were fine. There were some other people in the building. Not many, but then the looting began, and finally, the security guard of the building told them on Wednesday, I can't protect you anymore. You have to leave. And my son said, well, we don't have means to leave. And he said, well, there's one car down in the garage. I have the keys for it. I'll give it to you, as long as you take the little old ladies in 4B because they don't have any way to get out either. So, my son and his fiancée, their dog, their three cats, and the little old ladies from 4B and their cats all get into this Range Rover or something, I don't know what it was, and try to drive out of the city. They are stopped by looters, who try to hijack their car, but my son had a gun and he took it out and brandished it and they went away. So he was able to drive out. He dropped the ladies in Baton

Rouge and they kept going to Appaloosa where they stayed with these people who were the parents of the girlfriend of a friend of theirs. They had never met. They stayed there for seven weeks.

RH: Wow.

SH: So it was a very harrowing experience for them. We didn't have quite that situation. We felt like we were very much alone in the world here because after the storm, we came out and there was nobody around. There were no other people around. There was a little water on the street, on the main street, Metairie Road, which is about a block from here. But that was really nothing. We thought it was just drainage water. And we figured everything would be OK. So we went to bed that night, our generator was working, you know, we had some lights. No telephone. Our freezer and our refrigerator were being kept cold. So we thought, we're fine. You know. The next morning we woke up and we realize, no, we're not fine at all. Here comes the water. We didn't know where it was coming from or why it was rising but it was -- it was deep all around. But it hadn't come up our street, Garden Lane. It was on Metairie Road, but it was only maybe 30 feet up our street at that point. And, you know, we still felt, oh, we'll be fine. We went to bed that night, which was Tuesday night, and I got up early Wednesday morning, around 6 in the morning, to try to go across the golf course which is near here to try to get to a friend of mine who lived on the other side. I knew she was there and we saw that the water had risen

and I figured she was stranded. And we still were OK. I got halfway across the golf course and I realized I could not go on. The water was up to my waist. You know how a golf course is hilly and they have water hazards and I couldn't see where I was going. There were snakes in the water and, you know, trees down. Anyway, I decided it was not safe and I turned around and went back. And I got back home about 10 o'clock on Wednesday morning, and my husband had walked down to Metairie Road and he saw the National Guard was on Metairie Road and they told him what was happening, that there had been a breach in the levee and that they were expecting -- and that they thought we should leave. Needless to say, at that point, we couldn't get our cars out. We had no way, really, to leave. And we had our four dogs plus this girl who was curled up in a fetal position and not inclined to move. So, we didn't know what to do. He came back home. I came in. We talked about it. We decided to walk down, again, to the Metairie Road and go over to the bridge, you know, near our house that goes across the 17th Street Canal. This is not near where the breach was on the 17th Street Canal, but there, we saw that there were National Guard troops stationed there and we went over and talked to them. It was about 11 o'clock, and we saw people coming out of old Metairie carrying their worldly belongings. And we had no notion that it was also flooded over there. But apparently it was badly flooded over there and they -- we said, where are you going? We're getting out. We can't stay there.

We're getting out. The water is rising. We can't stay. So then, we turned to the National Guard and said, what do you think we should do. What's happening here? And they were the ones who told us about the break in the levee and that the water -- they were expecting -- that there had been another break in another levee and they were expecting five more feet of water to roll in. By that time, the water was already up to my thighs. It hadn't come to our house because our house is on a rise. But it was certainly increasing. We could see it was increasing. So they said, you only have one hour to get out of here before you will not be able to get out. So we ran home and in one hour's time we -- what do you do when you have an hour, you know? We didn't hardly know what to do. So I took all of the picture albums and I ran them up to the third floor. I took silver. I hid it. I took some paintings off the walls that we loved and put them up on the third floor. I did the absolute bare minimum, the barest minimum. Got this girl out of bed, told her, pack your duffel bag, your whatever, your backpack and we each got a backpack and we put in it important papers. We put in -- Bill had his computer. We each had our cell phones. I put some dog food, some bottled water, and a sack of apples. And a couple of changes of clothes, maybe underwear, mainly underwear, and that was pretty much it, you know. And our four dogs. And we walked out the front door. The last thing my husband did was turn off the generator and we walked out the front door. I was so stupid. I didn't even empty the

refrigerator. I didn't -- I just didn't think of it. I didn't realize that he was turning the generator off, but of course he had to because it would just burn up without somebody there to tend to it. So, we started walking and we didn't get very far, fortunately, before a man in a truck came along and he said, where are you guys going? He was a dog lover and he saw our four dogs. He says, where are you guys going? We said, I don't know. Where are you going? We're going where you're going. So he said, well, get in the truck. We got in the truck and we threw our dogs in the truck and we got in the truck and it was -- we said, just take us somewhere dry. Just drop us off where it's dry, where there's no water. So we went into Metairie and we were driving with him and he said, you know, I'm going to check on my parents. Stay with me and let's see what's happening with them. So he drove way far into Metairie to his parent's house. Their house was dry. They were OK. And they wanted to go to Baton Rouge because that's where their other child lived. So, he said, I'm going to drive with my parents to Baton Rouge. Do you want to come? And we said, yes, we want to go to Baton Rouge, because that's where the nearest airport was. Since we didn't have any car, since we didn't have any transportation of our own, I really believed we were going to walk to Baton Rouge. I truly believed that. I put a sheet into our backpack so if we had to stop along the side of the road and sleep, that we would at least not be sleeping on the ground. But Baton Rouge is 65 miles away. I'm glad we didn't

have to walk, but I would have walked. I definitely would have walked, because I did not want to be evacuated because they would have taken our dogs. So we had to walk on back streets. We had to stay out of the way of the National Guard that was literally forcing people to leave and to leave their pets behind. They would have had to shoot me. I was not leaving my pets behind. So, in any event, this man ultimately drove us to Baton Rouge and we called a friend who lived in Baton Rouge and asked if we could spend the night with our four dogs and they said yes we could, even though they had no electricity. And we spent the night and then we called another friend in Colorado and said, could you -- who has a plane -- and said, could you come and get us. And he flew the next morning to Baton Rouge to the airport and we got somebody to drive us and our dogs to the airport and he flew us to Colorado which is where we stayed for the next six weeks. And that is my story.

RH: That's quite a story.

SH: That is my story and I'm sticking to it.

RH: Wow. Wow. OK. So, you've found your children at some point.

SH: On Tuesday night, when this girl's cell phone began to -- her name was Britney -- began to work, we were able to call our daughter in New York. She was completely a basketcase. She had no -- because all she could see on television and all she could hear was total devastation. She knew what was going on, even if we didn't know what was going

on, that the whole city was flooded and our area was flooded.

Everything in our area was flooded. When we walked down the Garden Lane, all we could see was water in every direction for as far as you could see, and I didn't mention to you that the water didn't actually come very far up Garden Lane, but it started coming from the other direction. It started coming from an overflowing Palmetto Canal, and it was looking like it was going to meet in the middle. It did, eventually, meet in the middle. It just didn't come far enough up our particular yard to get in our house. But the people across the street, the people next door, the people on the whole other side of the street had water in their houses, and the people next to us did, too. On the lower side. The people on our left, there were two houses on our left, they didn't have any water. So, three houses on the street did not have water. Ours was one of them. So, my husband -- it was really funny. After the storm, he went and got the leaf blower and he blew away all of the leaves in the front of our house. Not all of them, but we have like a little patio area in the front of our house, and he blew it clean Monday night - - Monday afternoon after the storm was over. And I'm very glad he did, even though I told him, what are you doing? This is ridiculous. You know, there is debris. Downed trees. A tree fell on our house. I didn't even mention that. A huge oak tree, a 70-foot high oak tree, that -- lying on its side, the trunk was taller than I am, fell right there. Right where you are looking right now, that's where that tree fell. And --

RH: In the middle of the night? Did you hear it?

SH: It was about six o'clock in the morning. I definitely heard it. It was like a bomb going off. So, it didn't -- we had everything -- all of the windows were shuttered with plywood and most of the tree hit the ground whereas only the canopy hit the house and it wasn't enough to come through the plywood. Had the plywood not been there, it would have come right through into our house. But we were very lucky in that regard. I can't remember what exactly I was saying about that.

RH: I had asked you about getting in touch with your daughter.

SH: Oh, my children. Yes. My children, right.

RH: You were finally able to get them.

SH: We called, on Tuesday night, using this other girl's cell phone. I called her and she, then, knew where we were, but she didn't know where either of our other two children were -- or they hadn't gotten to her yet. So, eventually, Josh, the youngest one, who went to Atlanta figured out, since he couldn't get in touch with her that -- to us, rather -- he called her and she was able to tell him what was going on with us. But Darren, the oldest son, was still here. He had no way to get in touch with anybody, and we didn't reach him until Thursday. And she didn't know anything about him until Thursday. So it was really four days.

RH: Do you remember what you felt like when you heard he was OK?

SH: Oh, I just sat down on the ground and started sobbing. But you know, I was sobbing over everything. It wasn't just him. It was just that our

world had completely altered in the space of 12 hours. Irrevocably,
you know. [phone rings]

RH: So, you were just saying your world as you knew it and --

SH: I'm sure I'm not the only one who has said this, but to have
experienced it firsthand was so intense and to see it and to walk to the
corner and see that the water as far as we could see was chest-high at
that point, you know. It was hard to imagine, truly hard to imagine. We
looked down toward the expressway on Metairie Road, and it was just
water. There's a cemetery near our house. We looked in the cemetery.
The tops of the mausoleum were sticking out, but you couldn't see the
tops of any of the other graves. It was so freaky. It was so freaky. And
when we got to Colorado, and we had then found out the breadth of
what was happening, and thank God for our computers because it was
the only way we were really in touch with people. We didn't know --
one of the things that was very unsettling, I guess you would say, about
having this situation is that people scattered in every direction.
Everybody that we knew was scattered somewhere and we didn't know
how to find them. We did not know how to find them. You know,
friends, acquaintances, people who worked for us, service people,
whatever. Anybody that you knew on the street, anybody that was
your friend -- even our close, close friends, we didn't know where they
were. Even our children we didn't know where they were. It was so
unsettling to realize. I felt like Evangeline. I don't know if you've ever

read that poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, but it talks about the Acadians who are thrown out of Canada and on their journey, eventually they came here to Louisiana, but there is this really classic, American poem called Evangeline, and it's the story of this star-crossed lovers who are separated, never to find each other again. I felt that way. I really did. I felt, will I ever find these people? Will I find my family? It was the freakiest feeling. It was very --. And then to realize it -- and we knew this when we left here. Most of the people who left before the storm never thought that they wouldn't be able to come back. But we knew, when we left, that we would not be coming back here for a very long time. There was nothing to come back to. And once we found out that the levees were broken and that the water was rushing through and it would keep on rushing through until the level of the lake and the level in the city equalized, they couldn't stop that for a long time. You know, they were dropping sandbags the size of Volkswagens into the breach of the 17th Street Canal, and they were just being washed away because the power of the water rushing through the breach was just so tremendous. There was no stopping it until the level of the water from the lake and the city equalized.

RH: Wow. So, how did you start to find friends?

SH: Well, through e-mail. You know, for the people that I knew, I mean, whoever had their computer with them, the people -- then I was starting to e-mail to people, where are you, where are you staying?

And this one was in Natchez and that one was in Lafayette and the other one was in New York and this one was in Atlanta and that one was in Memphis, and you know, what happened to you. And we got these long e-mails back from people saying, here's my story, what's your story. And people -- people -- it was so intense. And then, once we got to Colorado, we have a vacation house in Colorado. That's why we decided to go there because we didn't have any car. Our cars were stranded here. It was either buy a new one or fly. I didn't know what else to do. So we would sit down in front of the television and watch the coverage and just sob. Just sob. You kept thinking, this is a nightmare. I'm going to wake up from this. It's going to go away. And of course it never did. And it's our life now. It was -- each day was so long, waiting to see what was going to happen. We just did not know what the future held for us at all. Six weeks is a long time to sit on pins and needles not knowing whether you're able to come back, what you'll find when you come back. We never knew if that extra five feet of water rolled in and if our house was flooded. We didn't know that for weeks. You know, when I left, I didn't even take my purse with me. I was -- when it came right down to it, I took my wallet and dog food, water. That -- you know, I didn't care about anything else, you know. It was very strange. It was down to the absolute basics of life. I've never been thrust upon the basics of life before, and I don't think too many people in this country ever are. Just enough to keep alive is what we

were thinking. We have to be able to stay alive to get someplace else. We have to not only stay alive but keep our dogs alive and this girl who was with us. Who was, you know, completely catatonic. She was depressed and she wouldn't say a word and we could barely make her walk. But she came along with us. It was very strange. It was very strange. And then -- of course, we only knew what was happening in our little area, you know, of the city. We didn't really know what was happening in any other place until we got someplace where we could watch the news coverage. We experienced it from a tremendous sense of isolation. We had damage all around us and no people and we felt totally isolated in the world, with disaster all around us. It was very, very memorable. Not something I'm going to forget anytime soon. It was much worse than Hurricane Betsy, and that was bad enough, but this was 20 times worse. Oh, I did mention to you that my husband had gotten the blower, the leaf blower, and he blew all of the leaves off the patio in front of our house. Later on, when we got to Colorado, and we were looking -- we wanted to know if our house had been flooded. And you know how you can get on to the Internet and see these aerial photos, well, we had this patch of clean patio in front of our house. It was the only way we could find out house. It was really funny.

RH: So he had kind of marked your home.

SH: He marked it for us. Right. And it was -- [phone rings] stop. Stop the tape.

[break in audio]

RH: Start to think -- when you started to watch TV from Colorado?

SH: Well, it was an unfolding disaster. I'm just -- you know, kept on getting worse and worse. You know, the water was high and then they started showing the Superdome and then they started showing the convention center and I knew that my oldest son lived one block from the convention center. So -- but it wasn't just for me. I was concerned for all of the people in New Orleans whose homes we knew they had lost at that point. You know, everybody was -- it was such a sense of incredible loss, you know, and mourning. We were just mourning. I didn't really expect anybody that I knew to die but we did actually have two deaths in this neighborhood of people who -- of elderly people who stayed in their houses and drowned. We didn't know it. We didn't know it, but it was found out later. But, it was a -- we were very sad. We kept thinking -- I kept thinking, this is a dream. I'm going to wake up from this. I couldn't grasp that it was really reality, you know. I couldn't believe that this was actually happening. I couldn't believe the scope of it. Indeed, until you come down here and see it, you cannot really comprehend the scope of the disaster, today even, and this is 15 months later. When we first came back here, which was in mid-October -- we came back as soon as they would let us back. This neighborhood was very badly flooded. Most of the houses in this neighborhood were flooded, and they were concerned about looting.

They would not let this neighborhood come back. In truth, the houses were uninhabitable. But people still wanted to come back and see what the situation was. They wanted to gather up their valuables that they hadn't taken with them. If they had a two-story house, they still had some things that they could take with them, but they couldn't let us come back until they could secure the city, and that took a long time. They did it by zip code, and our zip code was one of the last ones to be allowed back into the city. So, we couldn't come. In fact, we didn't come until we found out that there was running water. Not drinking water. We didn't have drinking water for a long time after that, but at least we had -- we could take a shower. And we had bottled water. As far as the electricity, we didn't have electricity when we came back. And really nothing was working here except the water was running. But we had to come back. I mean, we just had to. I work at the SPCA as a volunteer and I was very anxious to come back and help them as well. I mean, they were -- we knew, and I had been in touch with them from Colorado, so a temporary -- the shelter, the New Orleans Animal Shelter was swept away in the storm. Fortunately, all of the animals had been sent to Houston beforehand in preparation of taking in, not because we expected flooding, but in preparation for taking in animals that were stranded in the street for one reason or another. Left behind. You know. Who knows? Anyway, that, of course, never happened because the shelter was swept away in the storm. So, a new

temporary shelter had to be established, but not here because there was no electricity. So it turned out to be in Gonzalez, Louisiana, in an old horse, in some kind of horse facility, and they operated there for I guess about six weeks. No. Maybe about eight weeks. I came back and I knew I needed to help. There were thousands upon thousand of animals that had been killed, drowned, left behind. There were still thousands that needed to be rescued, that people had left in their houses thinking that they would be back in two or three days. And of course they weren't being let back into the city. So of course those animals all had to be rescued. They were -- there was a lot of work to be done with the animals and I was very anxious to come back here and do it. But, we couldn't come back until we had some place to go. They wouldn't let us in -- you know, they wouldn't let us come back to our house. So, as soon as they would let us come back, I did come back, my husband and I. And we brought our dogs with us and settled in to try to help, do what we could.

RH: So, tell me what your first impressions were when you came back to the city.

SH: I felt like it looked like Dresden after the bombing during World War II. It was black, first of all. There was no electricity. It was completely black. And, do you mind if we stop the tape for one second. I want to go --

[break in audio]

SH: No, I was talking about when we first came back and you asked me what it looked like and I wanted to show you a picture. Here. This is a picture of what we saw when we first came back. Jefferson Parish, which had lost their electricity by that time, which was six weeks later, had its electricity back, but Orleans Parish had no electricity and was completely devastated. This is almost two months after the storm. So you can see, from this picture, how very bad it was. When we came, the city was in darkness. National Guard were roaming the streets. There was a curfew. A very strictly enforced curfew. And they were no-nonsense about it. They were very -- they were threatening. They were truly threatening. I didn't want to tangle with them.

RH: So it didn't feel like --

SH: There were very few people. There was nowhere for people to live.

There were very few people. There were trees everywhere. One thing that I noticed. I surely wish I had thought about it at the time to take pictures. There were more of the strangest looking vehicles on the streets. I've never seen any of these vehicles before. They were -- I don't even know what they were there for, what they were supposed to do. All I know is that I saw 100 different kinds of trucks that I couldn't figure out what they did or what they were there for, but they were there for specific purposes, chopping, digging, carrying, loading, God knows what. I wish I would have recorded it because I've never seen them before or since. And I guess they turn up at areas of devastation,

whenever that happens. It was interesting. Of course, as you went around, what you saw in front of every single person's house was a junked refrigerator, junked washing machine, what they called white goods. And it became an art form. People would put their refrigerator out and then they would spray paint, Katrina, you bitch; or gumbo in here, come and get it. Of course, there was not enough money in this world to get me to open my refrigerator after it being closed up for six weeks with no electricity. I just -- that was one of the things that really made me rush to come back. I could not wait to get it out of this house. I just had horrible visions of maggots crawling around. Oh, it was horrible. Anyway, it wasn't far-fetched, either. It was bad. Very bad. So, as soon as people could, they came back to their homes to try to get that out of there, so that things could get a little normalized.

[phone rings] I'm really sorry about the telephone.

[break in audio]

SH: All right. This is a map that was published in the newspaper after the storm was over, and it shows what sections of the city were flooded. Eighty percent of the city of New Orleans was flooded. All of the blue is water that came from the lake into the city. This portion here is called the sliver by the river. This is the Uptown area. This is the French Quarter. And this is the central business district and French Quarter. And this area was not flooded. That's the 20 percent of the city that was not flooded. Everything else from here all the way over

here was flooded. Everything. And you know, 250,000 people lived in those areas that were flooded and they're still not here. And it's over a year later because there is nowhere for them to live. Here is City Park right here. I have it done in blue. And we live, basically, right here. There's a teeny little spot -- I don't know if you can see it -- that's not flooded, and that's exactly where I live. Right there. And that's the only reason we were not flooded. But the whole center of the city -- this is the heart of the city. Right here. And that is like the middle of the bowl. There was huge amounts, 10 feet of water, 12 feet of water in there, and people are still not back in their homes. It's a scene of complete devastation. This area right here, where the 17th Street Canal breach was, I went back there with my sister two weeks ago, who lives in New Jersey, and she came down for what we call the Misery Tour, and I was shocked, yet again, over how bad it is over there. You know, I said, I can't believe it still looks like this. It still looks the way it did six weeks after the storm when we got here. You know, all of the windows are blown out of the houses. The houses are leaning at drunken angles. There's nobody in them. You know, cars on top of trees. Trees on top of cars. Cars on houses. It's shocking, really, to think that a year later, it still looks like that, and nobody is doing anything about it because we have to be convinced that the levee's not going to break again before you put your money into fixing your property. I'm not sure if any of those people will come back, to be honest with you.

Their houses were completely destroyed. And there is 10 feet of mud in them. And they can't find their belongings. You know, we'd go out there sometimes, and you'd see like a doll hanging on a wall where the whole front of the house was washed away. It's just hard to believe it's still like that after all of this time, and here we are, in this wealthy country of America, and we are not able to deal with this. Just not.

RH: So how do you feel about the response of the local, state, and federal government?

SH: Well, I think that the initial response was terrible. That the federal government -- I mean, I don't -- I can't imagine that the state or city could have dealt with anything like this. It was a complete knockout blow. But I think that the federal government could have dealt with it, and they should have been able to deal with it, and they didn't deal with it, and when they tried to deal with it, they did it badly. But, the city, all of the communications in the city were completely destroyed. They didn't know any more than I knew. What could I had done? Nothing. I mean, how could -- they didn't have any -- they didn't even know what was happening, you know. It was impossible to know. At the state level, they weren't dealing with just New Orleans. They were dealing with devastation all across the south part of the state, so of course that was very complicated too. And in regard to New Orleans, the water stayed for a long time, and after it was over, after it was finally pumped out and things began to dry, along came Hurricane Rita

and it was re-flooded, so it was a very long time before anybody could really get a handle on the situation. Do I wish it had been handled better? Yes. I wish it had been handled better. Do I think that I could have done a better job? No. I don't think so. And I think it was supremely difficult -- it was the most difficult thing in the world to manage because it wasn't a problem that happened, and then cleared, and you could fix it. This was an ongoing problem that kept on happening, kept on happening, and it was very hard to get a handle on it. You know, I don't know. It's very hard.

RH: Tell me about your work when you returned with the SPCA. What did you start to do? Even while you were in Colorado, what was your role?

SH: Well, we needed money. We needed money to be able to operate. We had lost our shelter. We had lost our database. We had lost our donor base. The SPCA is a private, non-profit organization that depends on donations to operate. It was a very, fairly substantial organization; a \$3 million dollar budget annually, and 65 employees, and we would get 1,000 animals a month coming through the shelter. So it was a big operation. And all of a sudden, we had 15 employees. Everybody else was gone. You know, there were thousands upon thousands of animals that were in extremis. We wound up rescuing about 15,000 animals, and about 25 percent found their owners again. The rest never did. And they were sent out of state, a lot of them, and adopted.

All over the country. I would say the animal community worked really well, as far as that was concerned.

RH: And who were the animal community? When you say we?

SH: Well, Laura Maloney, who was the executive director of the SPCA -- terrific gal, very organized -- got on top of things right away. It was beyond the local SPCA's capacity, and eventually the Humane Society of the United States came in and helped us with the disaster teams because we were -- they were really probably a couple of thousand volunteers who had come in from around the country to help go out into the devastated areas and try to rescue animals. People were calling -- I have a very good friend who left their dog. And they were frantic about their dog, you know. They thought they'd be back in two days, and of course, they weren't able to come back. They weren't even allowed to come back, and they didn't know what to do about their dog. And they called the SPCA as did literally thousands of people. Here's my coordinates. This is where my house was. Could you see if you can find my animal, my dog or my cat, you know. One story after another of volunteers who came in from outside of the community to help us and we did all that we could, the people from this community, who could come back, who had a place to lay their head, you know, but who had to go to Gonzalez everyday to do whatever. Some people were staying in Baton Rouge, which is slightly closer, Gonzalez is sort of halfway between New Orleans and Baton

Rouge, and they were sending teams out. My main job is fundraising, so what I was doing was trying to get a national solicitation letter out. We had never had a national solicitation letter before, and so it was kind of, how do we do this? Who do we work with? What lists can we use? You know, how do we pay for it? All that sort of thing. Write the letter. Try to figure out. So that was what I was doing. And I was going -- I was doing a lot of it on computer from home, but also going to the shelter and doing what I could to help, you know. I was better doing what I know best, which is fundraising, but, you know, everybody pitched in because there were no people.

RH: So --

SH: We only had -- out of 65 employees, we only had 15 who came back. The rest? Who knows where they are? We don't know where they are to this day. These are not people who had computers, you know. E-mail. Whatever.

RH: I think the story of animals is a less-known story of how difficult it is. And what happened.

SH: Forty-four percent of people who stayed stayed because they did not want to leave their pets. Only 18 percent of people who stayed stayed because of a family member. So that tells you something about how people feel about their pets. Or, that it was more complicated to move pets than to take a family member with you, but it was definitely -- people felt very strongly about their pets. And they were anguished

over the fact that their pets were left behind and in danger. Completely anguished.

RH: Do you think there needs to be a recovery model that includes -- ?

SH: Oh, yes, but I think it's been addressed to some degree. After Hurricane Katrina, when we had Hurricane Rita, I don't know if you noticed this but people were allowed to evacuate with their pets from Houston, when they were evacuating Houston for Hurricane Rita. Turned out that Hurricane Rita didn't go to Houston. It went to the western part of Louisiana, but it was a change in how things were being handled. And, since that time, our executive director, Laura Maloney, has become the go-to girl for evacuations and disaster preparedness in regard to animals. And she's going all --

RH: You mean for the United States?

SH: For the whole United States. She's testified before Congress and she goes all over the country talking about this to individual states, cities, and so people's awareness is much higher than it ever was before.

RH: OK. We'll wrap up this tape.

END - PART ONE

RH: This is Susan Hess, for Katrina's Jewish Voices. And this is tape two. Susan, I was interested in your relationship to the Jewish community. Did you ever go and get help from the Jewish community?

SH: Well, no. Not really. Because we don't need help. We really came out of this in good shape. Let me tell you -- excuse me -- about my voice. I've had problems with my voice ever since the storm. I believe I have some sort of an allergy to the mold in the air and I don't really sound like my normal self. I'm sorry about that, but this is who I am now. I haven't been able to get rid of this.

RH: This is a post-Katrina event.

SH: Right. I hope it will go away one of these days, but it's a daily reminder of what I've lived through. It really is.

RH: What is -- how do you feel the Jewish community has responded within the crisis of Katrina?

SH: Well, I really think the Jewish community has been magnificent. You know, we have -- our institutions have taken a big hit. We had seven congregations here, seven meaningful congregations here, I would say, and three of them were flooded, one of them very seriously flooded. In fact, that one is gone. I don't know if they'll ever rebuild that Orthodox congregation, Beth Israel. They lost all of their Torahs. They were -- they're very sad. They're very, very sad. A lot of their members have moved, and I just don't know if the Orthodox community will get itself back together again. The Conservative congregation was flooded, and one of the Reform congregations was flooded as well. The rest of them had various damage, but not totally debilitating damage as the others did. But the two that were -- you know, the Conservative and the

Reform congregation that were flooded, pardon me, both of them are back online. You know, they're both fixed. People came in. Volunteers came in. Money came in. The National Jewish community sent money. The congregations are all being supported, in some degree, by money that's contributed from around the country. We have gone from a community of 10,000 souls to a community of about 6,000, perhaps. It's impossible to know right now just how many there are. But I will say this, those 6,000 are very active. Whenever I go to anything in the Jewish community, there are huge numbers of people. One thing I do know is that people need other people in a time like this. People are coming who might never have shown up at an event. They come to a Hanukkah party at the JCC or whatever. You know, 700 people showed up at the Hanukkah party at the JCC last year when I didn't think there were 700 people in town, really. It was -- everybody needed somebody else. They just needed to touch, to see, who's here, what's happening, and to tell their story. Even until now, when I meet up with somebody from New Orleans, we almost can never have a conversation about anything but Hurricane Katrina and what we're doing and how it's affected us, where our children are. It's just something that is so on top of everybody's mind, you can't have three people come together and have it not be the topic of conversation. It just consumes us. It just consumes us. That's all. But the Jewish community is very resilient, I'd say, and I think the Jewish

community took a very big hit because parts of the city that were badly flooded were parts of the city where a large number of Jews lived. Specifically, Lakewood South, Lakewood North, those areas were, at one time, the Jewish Country Club and the Jewish Golf Course. And when the expressway was built, it went right through the middle of the golf course, so there was no more Jewish Country Club. But, all that land that was owned by the country club was turned into a development, turned into a housing --

RH: Do you know what year that was? Do you have any idea?

SH: I'm thinking it was in the 1950s.

RH: OK.

SH: I can't tell you exactly because it happened before I got here. But that whole area of land that was owned by the Jewish community became a development and a lot of the Jewish people bought houses there and that area, badly, badly flooded. So there was a large concentration of Jews living there and they lost everything, pretty much lost everything. So we took a big hit and a lot of people have gone. I'll tell you what I think is happening with the city, and not just in the Jewish community, but I see it everywhere. The older people who don't have the heart for rebuilding are leaving, and young people who see opportunity are coming in. My own children, all three of my children, are now living here. They decided to move back after the storm. They want to be part of the solution. They see opportunity, and it's not just them. But

their friends. And when I talk to people my age who own companies, they say, yes, I lost most of my staff, but I've replaced them with young people with lots of energy. And I hear this over and over again. I really do believe that New Orleans is going to be a city of young people with lots of energy, and that's very hopeful. It gives me a lot of hope. But the older people, and there were a lot of old people living in the Lakewood South, Lakewood North area, because they built their houses in the 1950s and lived in them ever since, so they're up there now, and a lot of them don't have the heart for fixing. They're gone. They've gone to other places.

RH: Can you kind of see what the changes might be, I mean with all of these young people coming in? Do you --

SH: I feel as though the city has some future. There was a time there when I wasn't sure of it at all. I went to -- I do a lot of civic work, and in the course of my civic work I'm both the president of the local advisory council for the trust for public land and also a commissioner of City Park. So I thought there was a great coming together of the missions of both of these organizations, the National Trust for Public Land's motto is Parks for People. And City Park has -- was a hugely devastated -- it's the largest -- one of the 10 largest parks in the United States. It's double the size of Central Park. 1,300 acres. And it was under between four and 10 feet of water, depending on where you were, for three weeks. There was huge devastation. \$40 million dollars

in damage. Every building, every shelter, every bathroom, every kitchen, every pavilion, every boathouse, everything you can imagine, a building, 250 different separate buildings were either destroyed or severely damaged. So, I said, you know, why not have the Trust For Public Land adopt City Park. So I went to the National Advisory Council's Meeting in San Francisco last spring and I proposed to them that very idea. So they sent down a delegation and we took them around and then I went back to Seattle, just about a month ago, to present to the National Board, and lo and behold they've decided to take on -- adopt an area of City Park to be refurbished to the tune of about \$2 million dollars, which is, I think, quite significant. And with a chance for more if this goes well. So, I feel really good about that. And that's the sort of thing -- I was trying to make these connections in some kind of way, you know. OK. I know this group that, you know, does construction work from New Jersey. This Rabbi Saffron, who does construction work with his parishioners once a year. They go somewhere. They do some kind of Habitat for Humanity, rebuilding, or whatever it is that they do. That's their social justice project. So we said, come here. Help us. There are lots of Jews in need. They came last December. They gutted houses. They're coming back again this December to do more. So that's the sort of thing that, you know, you keep on trying to reach out. Come here, Cole. He's one of my dogs.

RH: Cole is one of the five?

SH: One of the five.

RH: Did he make the trip to Baton Rouge?

SH: He made the trip to Baton Rouge and to Colorado. Didn't you? Yes. He's a sweet boy. And they -- he and my three other dogs at the time, they adjusted very well. They did nicely. They went on the plane with us. And the guy who brought us on the plane was very nice. He didn't make us put them in crates or anything. The dogs all sat in seats.

RH: Oh really?

SH: He was very cute. He's a big dog lover. He was very good about it.

RH: Did they get served?

SH: No. We weren't taking any chances.

RH: With the trays?

SH: No. No chances. No chances with that. But they were just -- of course, it's a problem now, because they won't fly anything but charter. Hopefully, we won't have to do that again.

RH: You've also been involved in other civic duties, civic organizations, and a new one that formed after the storm --

SH: Two, actually.

RH: Oh, there are two?

SH: Women of the Storm, a group of politically active women. We've gone to Washington twice to -- our message was this: you [must] see it -- you can't believe it until you see it. Please come. We went to Congress. We went to see every single senator and representative and

extended to them a personal invitation, please come and see what our city looks like. You cannot understand it until you actually see it. And we did that last January and we did it again this past September. We have, not as good a response as I was hoping for, but better than most people thought we would get. So, we're continuing to press the people who have not come. There's still a lot that needs to be seen.

RH: So the senators and the congressmen?

SH: Right. We've had about half the senators have come. But not that many congressmen. I don't know exactly why that is, but now we're redoubling our efforts with the new members of Congress. We want them to come, too. So probably, we'll be going to Washington again pretty soon. And then, there is another thing that I'd like to talk about. There's an organization which formed called One Greater New Orleans. And it is a -- you may have heard of it before. It's a grassroots uprising. That's all I can say, of people who are mad as hell and they're just not going to take it anymore. In the first weeks that I was back, we did a petition drive to try to force the state legislature into adopting a Constitutional Amendment that would allow for unifying all of our levee systems into one. We had 24 different, separate little fiefdoms, and we felt that was part of the problem, that there was no real individual in charge. Nobody who could take the blame. And everybody was pointing at everybody else. So, with -- and this was in probably November. Very early. There were very few people back at that point,

and I went to -- I took a petition -- I went to a grocery store and stood in the parking lot to get signatures. Everyone else did the same thing; a lot of other people. We got, within the space of three weeks, 55,000 signatures on this petition for the state legislature when I know that in Orleans Parish, there probably weren't no more than 15,000 people living. So it wasn't just Orleans; it was all over the state. We had people working all over the state trying to get these petitions signed, and to have within three weeks 55,000 signatures was amazing. As I was standing in the parking lot of the supermarket, people were saying to me, yes, how many times can I sign? Can I sign for my husband? Can I put my son's name? People were so angry and they continue to be so angry. And one of the things that is so hopeful is that we never had any kind of political activism in that regard that way before. We never had any grassroots uprising of people, and I think it's a tremendously hopeful thing that people have suddenly said, I'm taking my own destiny in my hand. I'm not going to sit back and let somebody run my life for me. And I'm going to make it happen for myself and for everybody else who lives in this community. It's terrific. I think it's great. We've always been called the Big Easy, but I don't think you can call us the Big Easy anymore because people are very active all of a sudden in taking part of their own destinies.

RH: How do you think the recovery is going?

SH: Well, I would like to see the money being doled out quicker, you know, the Road-Home money is being doled out very, very slowly. There was an article in our paper this morning that 123,000 families are eligible for Road-Home money, which is the money that will help them rebuild their owner-occupied homes. And so far, I think they said 60 checks have been sent. I mean, it's absurd. It's completely absurd. To have, of the 123,000, 7,000 have applied and only, you know, a handful, really, have received any assistance, so I certainly would like to see that speeded up and I'm hoping that it will be. But, we're doing it very judiciously. I have to compliment the state on that. Mississippi, willy-nilly, gave out all their money and then the federal government withdrew the money because it was being fraudulently spent so we have not had that problem. We have not been accused of fraud. We've been accused, maybe, of being over-cautious and over-intent on making it right, which has slowed things down, but for once, we're doing it right. So I can't really complain about that. I want it to come faster, but I think gradually it will, now. In addition to that, the planning process has been very complex. There have been any number of groups come together to try to help the city plan for the future. But you know, it's not an easy thing to do. Every piece of property is owned by some individual. Who knows where they are? They're not here. A lot of times the piece of property, and I'm sure you heard this from other people, did not have a clear title because there was no succession.

People just took over where their parents left off and it went down generation upon generation and so it's very difficult to prove your ownership. It's very difficult to claim your insurance. It's -- all of this stuff is very complicated. Now we're having a terrible problem with insurance in this community right now. A lot of insurance companies, in fact, in the whole state, want to pull out. They don't want to insure anymore here. And it's almost impossible for somebody who wants to buy a house to get insurance. Well, if you don't have insurance, you can't get a mortgage, so that's very much putting a roadblock in the recovery process and it needs to be addressed. There are many of those situations. Insurance is not the only one. To get a permit, you can stand in line and die. You can be a skeleton by the time you got up there to your turn to get a permit for building. I mean, it's really difficult. City Hall is understaffed because their people are gone. They don't have any money. You know, we don't have any income coming in. People couldn't pay income taxes on their -- property taxes, because their property was under water. A lot of times, they're trying to pay mortgages while, at the same time, trying to pay rent somewhere else because they're not living in the property that they're paying mortgages on. It's been a tremendous drain of wealth out of this community in so many different ways, and it's going to have to be fixed somehow. I don't know exactly how. I mean, how long can a person pay a mortgage on a house that they're not occupying and pay

rent on another place that they have to live without being completely drained? It's very, very difficult. A lot of people have lost their jobs, you know. They've got to go somewhere else to get a job, and then they have to come here to fix it, you know, to fix their property. They have to manage to be able to go in between the place where they're working and living and the place where they're fixing, where they have to stand in line forever to get a permit. Nothing is easy. Nothing is easy.

RH: What do you think about race and the storm? Do you think the city is more divided racially than it was before?

SH: No, I do not, and I think that was so overblown by the media. I was very sad about it really. You know, New Orleans has never had the racial problems that other cities have had. We've never had a Watts riot. We've never had any of that. And people have always crossed lines here. You go into any club, you see jazz being played and you see blacks and whites sitting in the club. We are not divided the way they are in other places. I just don't see it as the kind of crisis that the media wanted to portray it as. I do think there were a lot of people who wound up at the Superdome for cultural reasons, sometimes for financial reasons, but a lot of times for cultural reasons, that they didn't want to abandon their property because they were afraid it would be looted. And so, in the end, they just went to the Superdome just to wait out the storm, assuming that they would be able to go home

immediately. There were hundreds of cars parked in the parking lot under the Superdome of people who went to the Superdome to stay. It wasn't that they didn't have a car to get out, or that they couldn't go with Uncle Joe, it's that they didn't want to leave. And I told you before, I have never left for a hurricane. Most people in this area do not, historically, leave for hurricanes. I would say that our Mayor did a Herculean job getting people to leave. He got a million people out. It's never been done before. They never got people to leave before, so, you know -- he was lambasted for the fact that he didn't call a state of emergency and make people leave sooner, but in truth, the people who wanted to go went and the people who refused to go were not going to be forced out, anyway. You can't force somebody out of their property, unless you call martial law, and he wasn't going to do that. So, no, I don't think we're in bad shape. I think that a lot of black people -- a lot of black areas were badly affected and a lot of those people would like to come back and there is no place for them to live. Probably more of black community has no place to live, and the white community -- but there were large, huge swaths of the white community that were badly affected as well and they haven't come back, either. It's not racial. I don't think so.

RH: What motivates you? With all of this? Why are you rebuilding New Orleans?

SH: You know, there are twice as many things to be done and half the number of people to do them, so everybody's got to be busy. You've got to do it. I mean, who's going to do it if I'm not going to do it. I'm strong and knowledgeable. I have to. I feel compelled. Also, I didn't have a flood, so I'm not grappling with all of the day-to-day difficulties that people who are flooded are. I feel so blessed in so many ways, how can I not give back to the community just because of that? I want to. Besides, it's so necessary for my well-being and my peace of mind to be able to do positive things for this community. I love this community. I really sat down and thought hard about where else I might live. My husband and I sat and talked about it. If we should decide to go, which of course we never would, but if we should decide to go, where else would we go? There isn't another place that's like New Orleans. New Orleans has a joy of living and an approach to life that is so wonderful and so positive and so youthful and zestful and -- I just don't know another city like it, and I just don't think I could be happy living any other place. Well, that's not true. You carry your happiness around within you. And of course, if I had to go somewhere else, I would find happiness there. But given a choice, I would most certainly rather stay here and I knew it the minute I came here. The first time I got off the plane and I walked down the street and people said hello to me, I knew I was home.

RH: Tell me about that.

SH: Well, I grew up in New York as you know. I never knew I was unhappy there. I just had this feeling that maybe I might like to live somewhere else. But I didn't really know how oppressed I felt living in New York. But when I came to New Orleans and I walked down the street and people were nice, you know, they said hello and they actually meant it, you know, I just felt like somehow I related to that. I wanted to be like that. I did not want to go back to the old way of life of being insular, you know. In New York, you're only friendly with people who share your interests. If you live in an apartment building, and the guy who lives next door to you doesn't have anything of interest in common with you, you can live there 20 years and never even know him. You would not know his name, what he looked like. And so, if you had an interest in, I don't know, playing the piano or listening to symphony music or something like that, then you would be involved with people who are like-minded. But that's such a narrow view of the world. I like it here where you can be friends with all different kinds of people. I am friends with all different kinds of people. We are. We have every different stripe of people coming to our house, and we go to their houses and we love it that way.

RH: Has being Jewish helped you through this past year? Has there been any concepts or --?

SH: I don't know. No, I don't think so. *Tikkun olam*, "To Repair the World," is something, certainly, that's in the back of my mind all of the time.

Does that motivate me? It -- you know, possibly, so deep down that I'm not even aware of it, that it's so much a part of my soul from just having been there all the time. I know lots of other people in the gentile community and all around who are like-minded, who work just as hard as I do. They don't have *tikkun olam*. What motivates them? I'm not sure. I just know it's a love of place, a love of people, and wanting to use my abilities as much as I can to make the best of the situation. Being blessed and wanting to share that.

RH: What is your hope for your children?

SH: Well, my children are, as you know, have just moved back here. I'm very pleased for them to have done that. Two of them are newly married and the third one, I suppose, will be married soon. They want to stay here. They want to be part of this community. And as far as New Orleans is concerned, I'm sure that it will be good for them and they will be good for it. The larger world troubles me a lot. When you asked me about my children, I say to myself, do I really want my children to have children? Do I want grandchildren that will come into this world that will have to face the chaos of cultural war that is coming on us and won't go away for the next 100 years, if then. I don't know, you know. I think we have a lot of ugliness ahead of us. I think we have a lot of real struggles ahead of us. Not just the Jewish community but the world in general. I see it going up in flames. I'm sure that it has gone up in flames in the past, that there are so many things, so many

difficulties between the, you know, Islamic terrorist threat, which I don't see abating anytime soon. I think the genie is out of the bottle. I don't see how you can put it back in, again. The nuclear threat that's looming. The global warming threat that's going to put tremendous pressure on populations by gradually flooding low-lying areas and pushing populations in on themselves. I see tremendous political upheaval as a result of this. I don't think you really want to hear how I feel. It's so terrible.

RH: Well, you're giving me your fears for the future. What about some of the strengths? What are your hopes? What are some of the strengths that you think -- that keep you going?

SH: I say -- yes. The only thing that I can say is, where there are humans, there is always hope. And where there are Jews, there is always hope. And that's the thing I cling to the most. I may not see a way out of these predicaments right now, but human nature is to solve problems and that's the only thing I can cling to. That even though I may not see a way out of all these problems, maybe my children will see a way out of all these problems. And where there is humanity there is hope.

RH: Tell me. Has Katrina changed any part of your worldview?

SH: Yes, it has. It's made me more positive about the population of New Orleans, about the fact that the population is willing to take on problems and try to fix them as compared with being very complacent and letting things just happen. I think that the people who have

remained here are the people that are equipped to fight; and the people who have left are the people who probably couldn't, so we'll be the stronger for it. I see a lot of benefit to the city. There were a lot of problems in New Orleans before the storm, and -- systemic problems. Really serious problems. Our education system. Our healthcare system. Our criminal justice system. Many, many things about New Orleans that were probably in decline. Maybe even more in decline than we would have liked to acknowledge. Everything's been shaken up. There's a light shining on every single one of those problems now. And whenever you shine a light on a problem, things change. I'm not saying that we're going to get to 100 percent. I don't even know if I know what 100 percent is. But I do know that things are changing and probably for the better. I have to believe that.

RH: How would you -- have you learned anything about yourself through this year? 15 months?

SH: Well, you learn your strengths and also your weaknesses, I suppose. I didn't know, for example, that I was so susceptible to being devastated emotionally. I mean, I'm not that kind of a person. I'm a very up person in general. But when I saw what happened, and when I watched the TV and news coverage while I was in Colorado, I was -- I could do nothing but sit and sob. I was so deeply in mourning for our community, for our way of life. But you come out of it, you know. That's human nature. You come out of it. And I feel stronger. I feel more committed.

I've always been committed, you know, civically, but I'm willing to do more. I'm willing to try harder. And so are most of the other people I know. Everybody has just taken on just a little bit more, and we're all working together. I like that we're all working together. It feels good. It really does. And it's every different type of person. We are all in this together, so to speak. And we are all going to fix it together if it's going to be fixed.

RH: Are there any priorities for you that are different?

SH: I'd like to see the school system be good. I'd like to see all those endemic problems that we had be repaired. I'd like to see the criminal justice system work better and the healthcare system be more comprehensive, especially the school system, though. I feel as though you can't make a future without a decent school system because people aren't willing to move here. I say young people are coming here. They are. But they have a lot of questions about what's going to happen with their children, and they have to have those satisfied if they're going to come, if they're going to stay. So, all of that, I'm very committed to it. Maybe more so than I was before.

RH: And what are you most grateful for?

SH: I have a wonderful family. My husband has been -- he's a terrific husband. He's been so good to me. And we make a great team. We work together really well. My children moved back to the city. What a gift is that, you know. Who would have ever thought it. Be careful

what you wish for. You might get it. My son was here for lunch. My daughter's coming for dinner. I love it. I really do love it. Our animals. Great solace. They were a great solace during the whole time we were gone. Really, they're our my mental health. If I hadn't had my dogs, I don't know. If I had lost my dogs, I never could have recovered. I don't know how people did it, who lost their pets. That's like losing a family member. Now, some people don't feel as strongly about it as I do, but for me, it's a big one. So, I feel very hopeful about the future -- the future of New Orleans, let's say. I feel a little less hopeful about the world, but you know, that may repair itself as well. Who knows.

RH: Well, we have our chorus here. [Dogs barking.]

SH: I'm sorry about that.

RH: That's OK. They're telling us it's time to close.

SH: Yeah. OK. I think so.

RH: So --

SH: My throat hurts anyway.

RH: If there's anything you like to add, please do, and then we'll wrap up.

SH: I'm fascinated that you're doing this project, and I hope it works out well. I hope that you and the country gain some insight from what we've gone through here to be able to understand human nature a little better and to be able to deal with it a little more upfront. I think -- they say, and I believe this, that no -- everybody is only seven meals away from being a savage. I think we saw that here. Our human civilization

veneer is not so thick as we would like to think it is. Perhaps we need to work on that.

RH: That's very wise.

SH: That's all. I'm finished.

End - Susan Hess